

8-1-1960

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Gilbert A. Thiele

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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Recommended Citation

Thiele, Gilbert A. (1960) "Melanchthon the Churchman," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 31, Article 54.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol31/iss1/54>

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Melanchthon the Churchman

By GILBERT A. THIELE

In presenting Melanchthon as churchman we try to erect a little monument to him as a man *of* and *for* the church. To assist us in bringing some order into a large mass of fact and interpretation which has been accumulating over four centuries, we have thought it good to distribute our tribute over several areas.

1. Melanchthon as an evangelical churchman
2. Melanchthon as a mediating churchman dealing with Reformed evangelicals
3. Melanchthon as a catholic churchman dealing with Roman representatives
4. Melanchthon as a catholic churchman in correspondence with Eastern Orthodoxy
5. Melanchthon as seen in contemporary ecumenical view

As an evangelical churchman, believing in and working for the spread, confession, and defense of the Gospel of salvation through God's grace by faith in Jesus Christ, Melanchthon confronts us in the very middle of the evangelical reform work of the early 16th century. Considering the mass of material in the Confessions, the *Loci*, the correspondence, the part he played in preparing Church Orders, and in all that the *Corpus Reformatorum* has brought us, it is impossible, it seems to us, to do anything else than affirm that Philip was true in his heart to the Gospel of Christ, the Evangel, in Word and sacraments, and that he placed his best talents, his unwearying energy, and his very considerable will power into the service of the evangelical church. The group of Christians which

has declared itself as believing and supporting the work of Luther, and all Christians who were not ashamed to bear Luther's name and support at almost any cost his cause in the confusion of the times, he sees as the church. He sees Luther as fitting perfectly into the procession of church fathers, councils and conciliar leaders, and writers Eastern and Western of whatever century, because Luther taught that which, above all, Christ came to establish and to disseminate, by which the church came into existence and continues to flourish, the gratuitous forgiveness of sins. Curved sideways, backwards, or downwards as he may have been in some, perhaps in many of his utterances, his funeral address at Luther's coffin—a most remarkable homily, also for its length—and his own last confession of faith, are expressions of evangelical churchmanship, in whose interest he dealt *with* Romans, Calvinists, Zwinglians, radicals, but always *for* the church of Christ, to which he conceived himself as belonging and which he considers in some places as identical with the kingdom of God and with the preached Gospel of forgiveness.

Melanchthon met many times in both controversy and irenic conversation with leaders and churchmen of German and Swiss Reformed churches. We can safely call him a mediating churchman here. What was he trying to mediate? Was he trying, even at the cost of negotiating away evangelical truth concerning Christ, the sacraments, the Word of God, to establish union with other Protestants, to pro-

duce a common front against Rome or others? He has so been interpreted. He helped to produce the Wittenberg Concordia of 1536. Here he dealt with Bucer, Capito, and other Reformed teachers. At Ratisbon, 1541, as at Hagenau and Worms immediately before, 1540 and 1541, Melanchthon worked side by side with these same men and with Calvin, in conference with the Romans, some of them decidedly evangelical, on the basis of the Regensburg Book, toward evangelical unity over against the Romans, and if God should give His blessing, even toward reunion with them. In point of fact, everything said about Melanchthon's work on Lutheran Confessions, including even the Tractate on the Papacy, and most certainly his widely criticized role in the preparation of the two 1548 interims of Augsburg and Leipzig, can fairly be said to be part of his work as a mediating churchman, hoping to weld Protestantism, certainly as a unit itself, and thus, if possible, as a more malleable church in dealing with the Roman church.

The words *catholic* and *ecumenic*, as well as *irenic*, *pacific*, *universal*, and *ancient*, frequently occur with the versatility of synonyms in Melanchthon's writings and reported addresses. The Confessio Augustana, if not his greatest, certainly ecclesiologically his most important work, begins with, and stresses throughout, Melanchthon's unquestionable conviction that the church he works in and defends is catholic. He rarely hesitates to accuse the mother church of having lost, or at least jeopardized, her own catholicity. When he deals at Ratisbon with Contarini, Gropper, Eck, Nas, Pflug, all great names in the list of Roman Catholic controversialists and irenicists, he seeks constantly to do all he

can, with honor and with loyalty to the Gospel, to bring about, by speaking and writing together with Roman Catholics over there and other Protestants over here, a confession that will survive the crossfire of the confessionalists. In this, of course, neither he nor they ever succeeded, but not because there was doubt in Melanchthon's mind that he was dealing as a catholic churchman and teacher with Romans who personally still had to be accounted as catholic. Note well, in this connection, that catholic for Melanchthon is not the same as papal, curial, or Roman, or for that matter, as Lutheran, episcopal, or Eastern, but the same as Christian, historically viewed. Indeed, we could say, without fear of error, that Melanchthon's idea of the church was twofold, Christian as proceeding in continuity from and with Christ, and catholic, as existing, in his day, in the form of imperially protected Christendom, as continuing from the year 325, Nicea. That is his catholicism.

We can give the following only a brief glance, but this catholicism becomes overt also in Melanchthon's ideas of looking over the mountains not southward but eastward, beyond the Moslem world, to the Eastern Catholics of Orthodoxy. In 1559, one year before his death, Melanchthon started an attempt at relations looking doubtlessly toward mutual recognition between his church and Byzantium. He wishes not only to acknowledge the catholicity of the East, of which surely Eastern churchmen had no doubt, but also to affirm the catholicity of the evangelical fragment or constituency to which he belonged. Viewed strategically, this would have been a master stroke of churchmanship, to encircle, so to speak, central Europe from the East and North

with an Evangelical, Orthodox, Catholic cordon of believers and churches! It was, of course, also not to be.

Current works on ecumenical theology and life like to cite Melanchthon as somehow more disposed toward union or reunion, as the case may be, than other Reformers. If it is the ecumenical viewpoint that we are to follow the principle of unity in essentials, liberty in nonessentials, and charity in all things — a summary used surprisingly not too long ago also by the present incumbent of the See of Rome as a sort of motto for his pontificate — then Melanchthon was ecumenical. His position on adiaphora, as capable of restoration if they do not violate Scripture and faith, and good, sound tradition, his readiness at most times to compromise the nonessentials but as far as we know never to give up forgiveness as central, Christ as mediatorial and

all-sufficient, and the church as actual also in the reformatory movement, and his serious and usually successful attempt to show all possible love to his partner in the dialog, make him, by the announced standard, ecumenical. One of the strangest thoughts about Melanchthon, with which I should like to close this very brief appreciation, was the opinion on the part of his fellow humanists, whom he never entirely disowned and who largely remained loyal to the old church, that Melanchthon would someday convert. Melanchthon, as we know, never did, and that was because he felt that he never really had left the true church of Christ when he joined Luther's cause and stayed loyal to it. Because to him church, indeed, *the* church, was wherever and whenever Christ was heard in His Word and offered in His sacraments, all differences, jurisdictional, political, ceremonial, and theological, notwithstanding.